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Content Development: Where Do We Go Wrong?

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Abstract

The middle to the late 90s saw a rise in the power of the Internet. The beginning of this century has witnessed a sudden downfall in its potency as a commercial force. The problem lies not only in business and financing models but also website content. The time has come for some introspection on our Web world — primarily websites and try to analyze the reasons for the changed situation — figure out where we went wrong and what is perhaps needed to be set right. This paper focuses on Web content development, with inclination to commercially driven websites and explains its importance to the Internet industry.

There is no dearth of documents and information resources to choose from when we seek from the Internet. Search engines have improved, subject gateways have developed with some satisfaction and with the knowledge of the right tools, we find the Web more amenable to our search needs than it was, say, four or five years ago.

Does this herald the beginning of the flawless era of digital documentation? Can we say that our information needs are always met perfectly by what the present Web has to offer? Are we in a position to announce our complete dependence on the Internet for our information requirements?

The answer is not simple. These questions raise more doubts. Why is it that so many businesses done through websites have failed? Why do we find several websites that had demonstrated a reputation in the beginning have now ceased updating their information and stopped several services? Why has the website industry had such a great descent?

While our dependence on the Web has increased in all aspects of life, there are still several impediments to our complete faith in Internet resources. And we find that this distrust has a lot to do with the 'free' attribute of the Internet.

Distrusting the 'free' medium

The term 'free' when applied to the Internet has different connotations.

- Almost all the content is there for all to access freely
- Practically anyone is free to publish on the Web
- Publishing on the Web is practically free of costs

While there are a lot of advantages of all this 'freedom', there is one big loser - the quality of content. And there are several issues because of which the content on the Internet suffers:

1. There are practically no standards, norms or even traditions to guide publishing on the Web as there are in print publishing.
2. The content provider does not have to go through publishers, editors, etc. and in the absence of checks, any content can be passed.

3. The universal permissiveness of Web publishing also means that banning, or prohibiting is next to impossible and while this is good for freedom of expression, an abundance of objectionable material becomes easily available.
4. The relative anonymity of the ‘publisher’ makes the user feel like he’s floundering in the dark, especially when it comes to financial transactions.

Hence, it is not surprising when we find that generally people do not want to completely rely on Internet content. People are especially wary of using the Internet in matters where there are financial implications.

Even in the cases where people do trust and do dealings on a website, it is generally when the website is attached to an organization or entity with *already established market and business credentials*.

Tracing Web content development

The history of Web content development is not ancient — it has taken place over the past 6-7 years. Despite all the multimedia excess, elaborate pictures, downloaded music, and stock reports, the mainstay of most Web pages is the written word.

John Hewitt [1] has identified definite stages or waves in the development of Web content. The early need for Web content resulted in an inundation of poorly written and badly planned sites. All businesses, from huge commercial empires to minor-league enterprises hurried to make a presence on the Web. In order to do this, they often depended on programmers — any employee or vendor who knew HTML to set up their site. Usually, this was achieved either by simply copying and pasting their existing advertising and marketing materials, or attempting to create something totally new and often useless. This First Wave has subsided to some extent.

The Second Wave heralded the assertion of the idea of the Internet as a medium of its own. Leading this wave has been the idea of the portal. A portal is a spot that features extensive, varied content designed to appeal to a large number of diverse people. Web sites such as Yahoo, Microsoft, Netscape, Excite.com, and indya.com provide news articles, weather

reports, horoscopes, stock tickers, and have begun to produce content of their own. The concept of Web content has moved from being a mere appendage to a primary consideration in commercial value and resulted in the movement from dry one-dimensional information content to value-added content. We now appear to be at the crest of the Second Wave.

Nowadays, some magazines do more than simply reprint their magazine on the Web — they add web-only content. Freed from the limitations of the printing process, they can now add articles almost instantaneously, and they can feature articles that are either too long or too specialized for a massive print run. Moreover, they can add more features and information to articles that also appear in the print versions of their publications, from specialized links to added graphics and online polls. Push/pull technology has delivered specific information to the user — what information professionals refer to as SDI service.

Writers were among the first to get involved in the Internet and the World Wide Web. With newsgroups, they began exchanging information and research. Realizing that the power of publishing was now cheap and accessible, they began to create their own e-zines (web-only or web-accessible magazines) the attraction of which is that one copy can reach multiple readers, thereby opening many smaller markets for writers.

The third wave

The Third Wave of Internet content appears to be the best opportunity for writers and information professionals. This will be a wave in which Web sites begin to provide *content as a means to profit*. Sites such as Ask.com, Learn2.com, About.com, and Suite101.com are beginning to prove that content-based sites can be commercially viable. These aren't magazines, or e-zines, but a new species of publication altogether. Sites like Ask.com and Learn2.com are generating advertising revenues by providing information. Ask.com works as a supercharged search service, one that tries to give you the answer to any question you ask. What separates Ask.com from search engines such as Lycos and AltaVista, is that Ask.com doesn't limit itself to searching the web. Ask.com has created internal content that it looks for first, and then it uses all of the other search engines on the Web to try to provide answers it doesn't have. Learn2.com provides a similar service, but without the search engine basis and functions as a powerful how-to guide.

About.com and Suite101.com are taking a different approach, but are still concentrating on answering questions. These sites work by creating online communities. They attempt to have an internal Web resource, with articles and links and advertisements, to cover thousands of topics. They provide the general format, but they rely on a writer/webmaster to maintain the content of each page. That person, who has expertise on the topic, writes and solicits articles and maintains fresh links to outside sites. The idea of these sites is to create more specialized portals. The business concept is rather simple but powerful — while each of these sites may not generate sufficient business to generate a great deal of revenue on their own, when banded together under one central roof, they make for an effective coalition.



Fig 1: The Suite101.com home page

It is interesting to note that Suite101.com (Fig 1) uses the Dewey Decimal Classification Scheme to classify its subject interests, even calling itself the Best-of-Web Directory™ with the ad line being ‘Powered by People ~ Organized by Dewey ®’.

Web content: what makes business sense?

From evaluating certain websites and their commercial viability, there are certain features that make business sense:

1 ‘PORTALIZING’

It has been found that a conglomeration of resources makes a better business model on the Web. There are so many specialized services that one can provide, but information about them is best available at one hub. It uses the concept of ‘library browsing’ on the shelves — where one can chance upon a related requirement while looking for a particular one.

2 VALUE ADDED SERVICES

Apart from serving as a PR device and advertising its products and services, a Website needs to attract an audience. The site needs to have content that motivates people to visit repeatedly. This is achieved only adding value-added content. This could be updated and useful information or ideas, a brain teaser, a contest, etc. This needs enormous imagination and creativity and the HTML/XML expert does not necessarily provide this. The need for such a person resulted in the rise of the Web Writer/Editor.

Content: creating a resource

When content is created, in effect the author/publisher is primarily creating an information resource. This information could lead to fulfilling needs for research, education, business, charity, or any conceivable activity. It can advertise a product, create and sell a service, or simply make one's life much easier.

In short, content is what makes or breaks a website. What do we refer to as content? In the context of the Internet, we have to take into consideration many attributes of what we see on the website — authorship, authenticity and reputation, and actual composition.

AUTHORSHIP

The author is the primary provider of the information on a website. Such a person has to not only excel in writing skills, but also have higher-end skills such as manual HTML and XML coding, knowledge of JavaScript, Java, VBscript, Perl/CGI, and Dynamic HTML. A sufficient comfort level of being able to use a web-page development package such as Microsoft FrontPage, Adobe PageMill, or HomeSite is necessary. Besides this, some companies may desire knowledge of Robohelp HTML if their content is more technically oriented.

AUTHENTICITY AND REPUTATION

A business site especially suffers when its credentials are not established. People are extremely wary of doing business and financial transactions on the Net because of the possibility of fraud. The ‘credit card fraud’ is a real fear of the Internet surfing public. An interesting development can be noted in e-commerce nowadays through a TV advertisement for bazee.com where a lady is seen espousing the use of the Internet-based purchase and sale service while emphasizing that payments can be made in cash. This is a classic example of a website content and service addressing an apprehension of the general public. The content of a website can influence the level of success of operations, which in turn breeds reputation.

ACTUAL COMPOSITION

This is what most people actually refer to as content, although the other attributes are part of the content. The composition refers to the text, images, logos, multimedia and interactive features, design and style, language, and consistency of format of the website.

Conclusion: what can we do right?

The paper has been discussing the various aspects of content development — on whatever has been done so far and what we can look forward to in the future. In the process, the development of websites themselves has been traced, substantiating that content itself forms the website.

It is difficult to actually list out what inspires good content and a commendable website since there are so many types, purposes and objectives of websites. However, whatever be the type of website, the following points may always be considered:

- The most important is to focus on the objective of the Internet resource — the intended purpose of the website.
- Updating the content and information as and when required, so that people always come back for more.
- To establish the website's credentials, by always providing unambiguous content and honest follow-up service.
- To adapt the content to changing times and be creative and accommodating enough to give what the users require and want.

Keeping these issues in mind while developing content may lead to the resurgence of confidence in the Dotcom ventures.

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